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Book Review: From Red Hot to Monkey's Eyebrow: Unusual Kentucky Place Names

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Rennick, Robert M., From Red Hot to Monkey's Eyebrow: Unusual Kentucky Place Names. Illustrations by Linda Boileau. Lexington, KY. The University Press of Kentucky, 1997, 80 pp. \$9.95 Paperback.

Over forty years a folklorist, Rennick teases the reader first with a map of tantalizing place names scattered across the Commonwealth: Red Hot, Pinchem, Egypt, Stop, Licksillet, Shake Rug and Monkey's Eyebrow. Next his two-page Kentucky map gives each county and place name on which he will focus. His chief concern is with the state's great variety of unusual names of communities and towns rather than the accuracy of reputed origins of place names. There is an appendix for analysis of sources. Rennick recommends his Kentucky Place Names (1984) for further reference.

How did these places get their names? At one time the United States Postal Service would permit a name to be used only once in each state; thus, local citizens gave snap responses on deeds or first maps. Later on, newcomers made these names even more colorful; citizens joked about their personal experiences and sometimes created place names through these jokes. Citizens lent from their family legacies and nicknames, a practice which accounts for the names of approximately one-half of the places mentioned in the book. Literature, pets, other animals, and extraordinary circumstances contributed their part to the naming. Likewise, out-of-state place names were borrowed in some instances, including some from other countries.

After an introductory section, most appropriately Rennick looks at the origins of the state's name. Certainly the area became known as the "dark and bloody ground," but Indian language does not have such a term. Still, the name Kentucky

was applied to the land and probably, even earlier, to the Kentucky River. Rennick concludes, "In short, we have no idea how Kentucky got its name."

What about Monkey's Eyebrow? It refers to a Ballard County site on the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. One account says the configuration from the air resembles a monkey's eyebrows. Rennick rightly wonders who would have been in the air prior to the 1900's. Before 1900 two relatives constructed a home and store there. Someone supposedly saw on a sunny day those two structures as animal eyes and the brush growing above them as eyebrows. The author questions, "But a monkey's eyebrows?" One potential customer shopped at more remote and less well-stocked Needmore because the nearby store was "only fit for a bunch of monkeys." Further, he would shop "no place that sells to a bunch of monkeys." That's what a 1930's Works Progress Administration researcher learned.

And the origin of Red Hot of Greenup County in northeast Kentucky? A new boiler fireman was to furnish a sawmill with ample steam. However, his failure to do so during the first week that the sawmill was in operation almost cost him his job. In order to provide for his family, he promised plenty of power. The next day he worked harder than anyone else had ever seen him work. Evidently he outdid himself because the boiler exploded, scattering him over the county. In fact, the intense heat delayed anyone's putting the fire out. That is the Red Hot version.

Be sure to check out Nonesuch, Decoy, and definitely Bugtussle in this entertaining tour of outlandish place names.

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